Student Engagement and Development

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In October, 1999 a diverse and interdisciplinary group of researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers met at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor to explore the idea of 'engagement' as one way to think about the link between children and institutions, particularly schools. Our focus on this concept/metaphor was stimulated by the widely-held general impression that children who will end up having troubled secondary school careers often disengage from school much earlier - during their elementary school years. In American society, this is also the period in life in which the peer group begins to exert increasing influence, and that children take more responsibility for choosing activities such as participation in sports, religion, and clubs. During middle childhood, some children begin to emerge from their family cocoons by making activity and involvement choices that, given institutional arrangements not of their making, can have major consequences for the rest of their lives.

We hypothesize that engagement, a more sociological, less psychological notion than motivation or performance, helps explain how children come to make these often consequential choices and learn a finite, specific set of skills, attitudes and self-perceptions, and develop social connections. Further, we believe that engagement affects these outcomes through at least two mechanisms: high levels of engagement in one setting or institution often necessitate lower levels of engagement in other settings or institutions. As a result, because settings or institutions differ in so many ways, children will learn those things afforded by the institutions in which they are most engaged and are unlikely to learn those things not afforded by these settings. That is, affordances in settings set the range on what children are likely to learn in those settings and differential levels of engagement across settings limits both the range of settings one gets to experience and influences the individual's motivation to fully engage the experiences afforded. For example, "engagement" in formal or informal activities directed by adults can give shape to children's peer groups in a way to promote positive cultural values and also can provide opportunities for the growth of individual skills, competencies, and positive psychological outcomes.

Engagement in school can also be generalized to other settings. As adolescents transition into the work place, it will be important for them to also be engaged in the work in order to be effective employees. Industrial/Organizational psychologist have begun to look at engagement as an important element in retaining staff in organizations (Tyler, 1999). To the extent that employees enjoy the work and are interested in what they do, the more satisfied they are with their employer and work place. It is important, then, to understand the mechanisms that create or enhance engagement with institutions so that children can be more engaged in learning at school but also be able to generalize this engagement into the work place as they transition into that role. Institutions also need an understanding of how important it is to provide opportunities for their employees to be engaged in the work and interested in the products. This can

lead to more effective employee retention programs and more satisfaction in the work place.

We define engagement in terms of three components (behavioral, affective, and cognitive) which interact synergistically with each other. Most researchers have examined the *behavioral* component of engagement (e.g., active participation). Evidence supports its association (conceptualized as effort, attention, persistence, work completion, and concentration) with learning. *Affective engagement* is the emotional component. Although less work has been done on affective engagement, motivational psychologists stress its importance for learning, arguing that the level of interest, 'flow', and enjoyment (versus anger, anxiety, distress, and boredom) experienced while doing a learning activity should increase both the level of active participation and the willingness to persist in the face of difficulty and go beyond the required work. *Cognitive engagement* has received the least attention. This investment involves more than just the attending to or showing interest in the subject matter, it is the basis for incorporating the information into one's knowledge base. We expect cognitively engaged students to seek out information from other sources outside of the school and to go to great lengths to fully understand a phenomena.

We have also been exploring the idea of "executive function" as one way to think about the decision-making process. It is a generic notion that refers to the way that both systems and individuals make choices, organize and coordinate engagement across activity settings and evaluate both processes and outcomes. At the level of the child and the family, for example, we would hypothesize that parents initially play the executive function role for their children and that children gradually learn to play the executive function role for themselves and for others as they mature and are given more responsibility for making choices, coordinating activities and evaluating progress or outcomes. However, the range of activities, the coordination demands, the potential dangers and the clarity of options are likely to be influenced by many internal and external factors such as the options available, which are likely to differ by community and by the interface and coordination among organizations.

Examples of questions that were addressed at the conference include:

- How accurate is the assumption that middle-childhood kids in contemporary America often disengage from school?
- Have there been changes in the ways that schools are organized that have influenced the ways that children 'engage' with what goes on there?
- What are the psychological and social mechanisms or characteristics of contemporary American schools and communities that promote engagement or result in disengagement?
- What characterizes the types of organizations or more or less regular activities with which children choose to engage?
- Is the 'executive function' metaphor a useful way to think about how individuals make decisions about engagement or about how organizations help individuals coordinate their engagement in various settings in order to meet their needs?

Usefulness of Engagement

The engagement construct has several characteristics that make it useful and valuable. First, the concept of engagement is easily understood by practitioners; that is, teachers, principals, parents and researchers alike share an intuitive sense of what engagement means and also of the value of children's engagement with schools, families, religious organizations, and peer groups. Second, engagement integrates psychological and sociological perspectives of the relationships between individuals and institutions and of the relationships between the affective, behavioral and cognitive aspects of experience. Third, engagement is measurable across ages and across cultural, racial or ethnic, and social class groups. We do not yet know how the relationships between engagement and other variables differ across various groups, but research to date indicates that we can successfully measure involvement and attachment and effort over time for children from diverse backgrounds. Fourth, engagement is predictive of policy-relevant outcomes. Children who are highly engaged in school are more likely to remain in school and to graduate from high school, to be actively involved in their communities, and to be economically self-sufficient as adults. All of these factors, taken together, point to the value of further research on student engagement.

Engagement in the context of school reform efforts

It is difficult today to talk about children's performance in school without discussing school reforms. All of the speakers at the conference addressed the role of increasing engagement within the context of current school reform movements. This is an explicit goal of some reform efforts but more implicit in others and there are numerous avenues through which increased engagement may come about. For example, some ongoing reform projects begin with structural changes: reducing student-teacher ratios, increasing supports and opportunities for students and adults, instituting more flexible procedures for allocating resources, and setting clear and fair academic and conduct standards. We refer to this type of school site reform as 'top down,' meaning that changes begin at the level of the organization and are initially focused on institutional arrangements and practices. In contrast, 'bottom up' reform approaches begin by changing and improving the curriculum and instruction practices and allow for other reforms to occur collaterally to these changes. Related to this, curricula that include project-based learning and authentic tasks should produce increases in both learning and in engagement. Our collective view is that the most successful school reform efforts are those that seek to improve learning and engagement by simultaneously implementing both top-down and bottom-up reforms.

An excellent example of successful reforms from the top down and bottom up is that of Central Park East Secondary School in New York City. Participants in the conference heard about the many changes that occurred at that school and the tremendous record of student retention and graduation and parent participation. The innovative approach taken by the staff at Central Park East was clearly targeted at

increasing student engagement, along with learning and performance. Many questions remain, however, regarding efforts to ‘scale up’ this type of total school reform. We hope to continue to learn from practitioners who have been successful in implementing structural and curricular changes to more fully engage all students.

Recommendations for Future Research

We feel strongly that the construct of engagement is very useful for understanding the processes by which children come to identify with and participate in the learning environment of school or alternatively, withdraw from this crucial institution. In addition, emerging research points to the first few years of formal schooling as the period when many children begin to disengage from school and begin a downward pathway that will affect their long-term productivity, self-sufficiency and well-being. Children from disadvantaged groups may be especially prone to disengagement given the lack of supports and opportunities available to them from other individuals and institutions.

Future research on student engagement will be vital for better understanding the educational trajectories of children. First, researchers must develop reliable and valid measures of engagement that can be easily administered in multiple settings with students from all ethnic and social classes. Second, rigorous longitudinal studies that track students' engagement and performance over time, as well as changing contextual features of their schools and classrooms, are necessary to sort out the interactive effects of individuals and contexts. Third, practitioners and researchers must work together to develop new and innovative curricula designed to 'hook' students into learning through the use of authentic tasks and real-world situations. Finally, numerous school reform efforts are currently underway, ranging from what we have referred to as 'top down' and 'bottom up' approaches. Many of these movements have clearly articulated goals of improving student, teacher and parent engagement. We strongly encourage rigorous evaluations of these efforts that seek to identify those programmatic aspects that are successful in increasing engagement.

Conference Attendees

Phyllis Blumenfeld	University of Michigan
Jacquelynne Eccles	University of Michigan
Walter Secada	University of Wisconsin-Madison
Diane Scott-Jones	Temple University and NSF
Lauren Resnick	University of Pittsburgh
Paul Schwarz	Teachers College
Mary Larner	Packard Foundation
Mitchell Chester	Philadelphia Public Schools
Juanita Clay Chambers	Detroit Public Schools
Fred Doolittle	Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation
Leah Meyer Austin	Kellogg Foundation
John Modell	Brown University
Tara Scanlan	University of California, Los Angeles
Reed Larson	University of Illinois
James P. Connell	Institute for Research and Reform in Education
Pamela Davis-Kean	University of Michigan
W. Todd Bartko	University of Michigan
Russ Rumberger	University of California, Santa Barbara
Eve Bither	U. S. Department of Education
Ronald Marx	University of Michigan
Jennifer Fredricks	Graduate Student, University of Michigan
Alison Paris	Graduate Student, University of Michigan